

The Absolute as Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman / Dr Joseph Thadathil. — In : Annales de philosophie et des sciences humaines. — N° 21, t. 2 (2005), pp. 33-45.

Cover title : Annales de philosophie et des sciences humaines. — Bibliogr.

Notes au bas des pages.

1. Philosophy, Hindu. 2. Brahman. 3. Absolute, The.

PER L1044 / FP195612P

THE ABSOLUTE AS NIRGUNA BRAHMAN AND SAGUNA BRAHMAN

DR JOSEPH THADATHIL

St. John the Baptist Church – Kerala

INTRODUCTION

The philosophical exposition of *Nirguna Brahman* and *Saguna Brahman* is a very fascinating development of the idea of the Brahman¹ or Absolute by Śankara, popularly known as Śankarāchārya, the most illustrious son of Indian philosophical world and the arch proponent of the Advaita School of Vedānta Philosophy. For Śankara the supreme reality is called Brahman. The word Brahman is derived from the Sanskrit root *brh*, which means ‘expansion’, or ‘to be great’² Śankara considers Brahman as the highest secret name or designation of the ‘Truth of truth’.³ He accepts the existence of Brahman before all created realities⁴. The fundamental principle of Śankara is that Brahman is non-dual.

1. Sankara considers that Brahman is identical with or the same as Ātman. BUB 4.4.17.

2. BSB 1.1.2.

3. BUB 2.1.20.

4. BSB 2.3.14. See also A. Rambachan, “The Value of the world as the Mystery of God in Advaita Vedanta”, *Journal of Dharma*, Vol.14, 1989, 289.

However, different passages of *Upanishads* diverge in their description of Brahman. Some appear to favour the idea that Brahman is without quality and beyond personality. According to this concept, Brahman is beyond the reach of intellect and the other faculties of man. Other passages hold that Brahman is full of qualities and is personal. There are many *Upanishadic* passages, which explicitly recognize Brahman as the cause of world¹ and the dwelling place of different qualities.² Taking these facts into consideration Śāṅkara comments:

Brahman is apprehended under two forms; in the first place as qualified by limiting conditions owing to the multiformity of the evolutions of name and form, i.e. the multiformity of the created world; in the second place as being the opposite of this, i.e. free from all limiting conditions whatever.³

1. LEVELS OF REALITY AND KNOWLEDGE

In order to reconcile the two seemingly opposing views of Brahman, Śāṅkara puts forward different levels of *satta* or reality and different levels of knowledge corresponding to these levels of *satta*. For Śāṅkara there are three levels of *satta*, i.e. *prātibhāsika satta*, *vyāvahārika satta* and *pāramārthika satta*. The first one is mere illusory existence without having any sort of reality. It is considered to be reality or truth when it has a meaning to the subject and when it is denied in practice the reality ceases to have any more meaning⁴. In short, this *satta* is not at all *satta*. E.g. Misunderstanding rope for a snake. *Vyāvahārika satta* indicates the empirical world together with its various objects, i.e. all objects of our normal waking state. It is taken in to consideration always in relation to a conscious subject. Even here the meaning has reference to a particular universe of thought and if this particular universe of thought is changed, the so-called meaning also disappears.⁵ Here Śāṅkara meant empirical reality. Empirical reality and its knowledge have greater value than that of the illusory one. Therefore, Śāṅkara says, “this apparent world ... cannot be denied unless someone should find out some new truth (based on which he could impugn its existence)”⁶. This empirical level of reality and knowledge are transcended by *pāramārthika satta* and *pāramārthika* level of knowledge. Earthly engagements

1. TU 3.1.

2. CU 3.14.2.

3. BSB 1.1.11

4. A. Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Post-Sāṅkara Dialectics*, Delhi 1956, 17-18.

5. Ibid., 18.

6. BSB 2.2.31.

have place till the attainment of the vision of the *pāramārthika satta* or supreme reality.¹ Brahman is the supreme reality or *ekam eva hi paramārtha-satyam brahma*, the only *pāramārthika satta*.² This level of knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of Brahman is *the* knowledge. Empirical knowledge, based on the empirical world or reality has a relative value while the illusory knowledge has no value at all.

It is in accordance with the distinction of empirical and absolute reality, Śankara distinguished two concepts of Brahman: Brahman without qualities and Brahman with qualities. The former is called *Nirguna Brahman* and the latter, *Saguna Brahman*.

2. NIRGUNA BRAHMAN

2.1 The Concept

Śankara maintains that there is only one ultimate reality and for him this absolute reality is called Brahman. The supreme reality is attributeless or *nirguna*. Brahman is considered as the reality in which subject-object distinction is non-existent; it is beyond names and forms and limiting adjuncts and hence none of the predicates are applicable. This Brahman has the highest ontological status and it is logically prior to and is required for the manifestation of *Saguna Brahman*.³ The unity, oneness and indivisibility of Brahman are emphasized by the concept of *Saguna Brahman*. Many passages of the *Upanisads* witness to these facts as well as to the prior existence of the God. "In the beginning, my dear, this world was just Being (*satt*), one only, without a second."⁴ This Brahman is the supreme reality and there is no other reality equal to it in any respect.

2.2 The Problem of Indefinability

Being without quality *Nirguna Brahman* cannot be described positively. Eliot Deutsch says that "*Nirguna Brahman*- Brahman without qualities - is just that

1. BGB 18.50; BSB 2.1.14.

2. TUB 2.6.

3. See BSB 1.3.13; 3.3.39. See also B.K.Gupta, "The Meaning of The Absolute in Sankara and Swedenborg", *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 24 (1975), 16.

4. *Ekamevādvitīyam* CU 6.2.1: See also AU 1.1.1.

transcendent indeterminate state of being about which nothing can be affirmed.”¹ Cochran adds:

In His Absolute Wholeness, *Brahman* is beyond phenomenology, name, form, distinctions and diversity (*nirguna*). Impersonal and dispassionate, *Brahman* defies boundedness.... Despite seeming attributes, indivisible wholeness remains preserved amongst the plurality of the world of appearances.²

The attempt of Śankara to define the nature of Brahman met with the problem of indefinability because Brahman is not an object of rationalization and as such does not come within the scope of categories of human language, for the use of language pre-supposes subject-object distinction or duality. Commenting on *Gītā* the philosopher states that Brahman does not belong to a species of existents and it does not have qualities. In other words, with regard to Brahman distinctions, whatever type may they be, do not exist. To put it in Śankara's own words:

Brahman belongs to no genus. Wherefore it cannot be denoted by such words as 'sat (existent)'. Being devoid of attributes it possesses no qualities. If it were possessed of qualities, then it could be denoted by a word implying quality. Being actionless, it cannot be indicated by a word implying an act.³

Therefore, Brahman is clearly devoid of all positive determinations. It is by immediate experience that Brahman is apprehended and this experience is incommunicable. To apply a predicate to Brahman is to impose some kind of limitation upon it.

2.3 *Brahman and Via Negativa*

Since Brahman is *nirguna*, the Upanishads resort to negative characterization, viz., “not this, not this” (*neti neti*). For instance *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* says:

That Soul (*Ātman*) is not this, not this (*neti, neti*). It is unseizable, for it cannot be seized. It is indestructible, for it cannot be destroyed. It is unattached, for it does not attach itself. It is unbound. It does not tremble. It is not injured⁴.

1. E. Deutsch *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, Honolulu 1971, 12

2. L A Cochran, “Maya: The Great Veil”, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly: Students' Supplement*, Vol.15, 1988, 4.

3. BGB 13.12.

4. BU 4.4.22: See also BU 2.3.6; 3.9.26.

This passage makes it clear that Brahman is absolutely non-empirical. These sorts of negative descriptions and definitions suggest that Brahman is nothing that man is able to conceive; it is something which man is unable to comprehend. The most appropriate way to indicate the nature of non-dual reality is *via negativa*. The real is thus unthinkable and thought can be brought to it only through negations of what is thinkable. Interpreting this position of scriptural passages Śankara arrives at the conclusion that *via negativa* “is the only description of Brahman”¹.

2.4 Saccidānanda

The difficulty of empirical characterization and the description characterized by the *via negativa* do not mean that Brahman is a mere nothing or void. As Mahadevan says, “this does not mean that Brahman, the absolute is a night of nothingness”². Expressions like ‘*neti, neti*’ are used to say what Brahman is not. Though it is agreed that Brahman is best described *via negativa* we also use *via positiva*. In our consideration there are three words expressing the very essence of Brahman. These three words are coined together and thus Brahman is designated as *Saccidānanda*, i.e., “being” (*sat*), “consciousness” (*cit*), and “bliss” (*ānanda*)³. These words are not the attributes or adjectives qualifying or limiting Brahman. Deutsch advises caution when he says, “Brahman is not *Saccidānanda*, if by that designation a positive limiting character is given to Brahman”⁴. In other words, these expressions are the synonyms of the Brahman but not related among themselves⁵. Brahman is fullness of being which enlightens and it is joy itself.

2.4.1 *Sat*: Pure Being

In Sanskrit nouns *sat* and *satyam* having meanings ‘being’, ‘reality’, ‘truth’, etc., are derived from the root *as* which means ‘to be’ or ‘to exist’. What is the significance of *satyam*? That which is *satyam* does not change its nature, and as such is opposed to *asatyam*, which is apparent or mutable. The ultimate reality is described as being. Śankara sees Brahman as the only ‘thing’ that exists⁶ and as

1. BSB 2.3.6.

2. T.M.P Mahadevan “Sankara”, D.H. Bishop, ed. *Indian Thought: An Introduction*, New Delhi, 1975, 289.

3. AB 56.

4. E. Deutsch *Advaita Vedanta*, 10.

5. TUB 2.1.

6. AB 63

the reality, which is present always, and everywhere¹. Brahman alone exists in the real sense of the term.

2.4.2 Cit: Pure Consciousness

Cit means knowledge or consciousness. Pure consciousness is one, which requires no knowledge of consciousness. It is that through which being is present. It is pure awareness. Being pure consciousness Brahman is devoid of all sorts of distinctions. Śankara says that the supreme reality is non-dual and does not have the distinction between cognizer and the object of cognition². As the sun shines even when there is nothing for it to shine on, so the Brahman is consciousness though there is no object³. Consciousness as the nature of Brahman does not depend on any object for its existence or is not conditioned by anything.

2.4.3 Ānanda: Pure Bliss

Ānanda is the derivative of *nand*, which means 'to be delighted' or 'to be pleased'. Therefore, *Ānanda* signifies bliss or happiness that points to the principle of the value rather than mere pleasure. When Śankara declares that "the self consisting of bliss is the real self on account of its being the inner most (i.e. the last)"⁴, he indicates nothing other than the fact that bliss constitutes the very nature of Brahman.

3. SAGUNA BRAHMAN

Being *nirguna* or unrelated to anything else Brahman is very abstract. For Śankara this non-dual and relationless Brahman or *Nirguna Brahman* is personalized as *Saguna Brahman*. Pure being in its totality is beyond the comprehension of man who is limited. In his attempt to affirm his limited spiritual experience, man is prompted to endow Brahman with very many qualities. As a result Brahman becomes *Saguna Brahman* and the personification of Brahman is called God or *Īśvara*.⁵ *Īśvara* is the product of discursive thinking by which we categorize the Absolute in terms of subjects or objects. Here Brahman is *tejomayah amrtmayah Purusah*, shining immortal person.⁶ The

1. Ibid., 65

2. MaKB 4.99.

3. BSB 2.3.18.

4. Ibid., 1.1.12.

5. BSB 1.1.1.

6. BU 2.5.1.

Absolute, seen as distinct from ourselves and adorned with magnificent qualities, becomes the object of religious consciousness. Brahman is seen as the seat of different auspicious qualities.

It is the devotees, who give Brahman all sorts of attributes. In so far as the human mind wishes to have intelligible discourse about Brahman it cannot but make use of these forms and attributes, for it is the nature of the intellect to attribute predicate to a subject. The distinctions in the form of attributes, which emanate from Brahman, are considered as manifestations of his infiniteness.¹ The temptation to decorate Brahman with different types of attribute is a consequence of ignorance. Man's bondage and suffering are due to original ignorance or *avidya*. Man or individual self-remaining in empirical level of existence is man living in bondage. Man remaining in bondage, is fond of considering Brahman as *Īśvara*.

Although Brahman stands beyond any human description or definition, common man tries to understand the Absolute through various adjectives like creator, preserver, and so on. Thus Absolute is described in its conditioned aspect and as such it is given an ontologically low status. As *Īśvara*, Brahman is seen in relation to world and man.

3.1 Brahman and the World

Very often Brahman appears as the cause of the universe who creates the world through his illusory power of *Māyā*. Sankara makes the observation that

If Brahman is acknowledged as the cause of the world, all attributes required in the cause (of the world) are seen to be present- Brahman being all-knowing, all-powerful and possessing the great power of *Māyā*.²

Saguna Brahman or *Īśvara* is Brahman seen in relation to the world. It would be meaningless to speak of *Īśvara* except in relation to the world. Brahman is seen as the creator preserver and end of all the objects. From Brahman "proceed the origination, sustentation, and retraction of this world"³. There is no independent matter, which is irreducible to Brahman. Brahman is the real and what is there from the beginning.

The universe which is at present is known by the mind and is indicated by the word 'this' and becomes known to the mind as existent and pointed out by the

1. L. A. Cochran, "Maya", 4.

2. BSB 2.1.37. See also VC 108.

3. BSB 1.4.23.

word 'Being', was in the beginning (i.e. before creation) only known as existent and pointed out by the word 'Being'.¹

3.2 Brahman and Causality

Brahman is the only one and the total cause of the universe. Although Brahman creates, its creativity is apparent only and has nothing to do with Its being. It is the *adhithāna* (ground) of the appearance of the world as well as the *upadāna kāraṇa* (material cause) of the world. It is also said to be the *nimitta kāraṇa* i.e. the determining or the shaping or the instrumental cause. In short, it is to be seen as the ultimate source or the reality giving principle of the universe. It is the datum, which is present at the beginning of the effect.² Śankara expresses the fact that Brahman is the total cause of the world by saying that Brahman created the world "just as in the world an intelligent architect or others think, 'I shall construct a palace etc. according to this plan', and build up the palace etc. after that deliberation"³.

Śankara is of the opinion that the effect before its actual production exists in the cause in an unmanifest form⁴. This theory, called *Satkāryavāda*, is one, which is held also by the *Sāṃkhya* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophers. This theory holds that the effect pre-exists virtually as a future possibility in the power of its cause. *Satkāryavāda* is of two forms: *Parināma-vāda* and *Vivarta-vāda*. While the former holds that the effect is the *parināma* or real transformation of the material cause in to the effect, the latter holds that it is only *vivarta* or apparent modification of the material cause. Although the word *parināma* appears in Śankara, he is not an advocate⁵ of *Parināma-vāda* in the same sense as it is held by *Sāṃkhya*. He admits that causality and related factors have only an empirical relevance. The effect is non-different from the cause itself. What is called the effect, in reality is not the effect, but mere name and form. Only when the cause is there, can the effect also be observed to exist. This kind of view held by Śankara can be better described as illusionistic *Parināma-vāda*.⁶

1. CUB 6.2.1.

2. See F. Britto, "Sankara and Creation", *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies*, Vol. 12, (1973), 138.

3. AUB 1.1.2.

4. See BSB 2.1.17.

5. See *Ibid.*, 2.1.14-15.

6. See P Hacker, *Vivarta: Studien zur Geschichte der illusionistischen Kosmologie und Erkenntnistheorie der Inder*, Weisbaden, 1953, 210

3.3 BRAHMAN AND MAN

For Śāṅkara the existence of the individual self is something beyond questioning. In an explicit assertion he says, “the existence of the witnessing self is self-proved and cannot, therefore, be denied”¹. To this effect he is appealing to a sort of *cogito* argument as in Descartes. Therefore, denial of the self is equivalent to self-refutation. This argument finds its various forms in Śāṅkara’s commentary on the *Brahma Sutra*, where in the beginning of the treatise there is the pertinent remark:

For everyone is conscious of the existence of (his) Self, and never thinks “I am not”. If the existence of the Self were not known, everyone would think ‘I am not’².

It is only because of ignorance that the individual man appears to be finite.³ The bondage is an immediate outcome of the false identification of the soul with the body. The cause of this identification is *avidya*. “Identifying the self with the non-self - this is the bondage of man, which is due to his ignorance, and brings in its train, the miseries of birth and death.”⁴ Bondage can be broken and freedom can be brought in with right knowledge, viz., knowledge of the supreme Reality. It is said clearly that “the highest aim of man is realized by the knowledge of Brahman.”⁵ The knowledge of Brahman which effects the final release is said to terminate in *sāksātkāra of Brahman*. This knowledge is not mere empirical knowledge but *anubhava jñāna* or experiential knowledge.

4. NIRGUNA -SAGUNA BRAHMAN: A REALISTIC APPROACH

While in *Nirguna Brahman* all subject-object distinctions are obliterated and overcome, in *Saguna Brahman* these distinctions are integrated and harmonized. *Saguna Brahman* is an objectification of determinate spiritual experience. The absolute reality, called Brahman, is devoid of all sorts of attributes. *Nirguna Brahman* is a state of spiritual enlightenment (*jñāna*) and is conceptually an objectification of spiritual experience without distinction or determination. The multi-farious appearances of the one reality are due to our identification of ourselves with the limiting adjuncts, viz., the intellect, the senses and the

1. BSB 2.2.28.

2. Ibid., 1.1.1. See also 2.3.7.

3. AB 4

4. VC 137.

5. BSB 1.1.1

emotions. The wise will understand that the forms and names attached to Brahman are necessities of rational thought and the ignorant will consider them as infallible truth.

In order to solve the problem created by the two Brahman (Saguna and Nirguna), Śankara says that this is caused by the *vyāvahārika* or empirical outlook of man. Looking from the absolute or *Pāramārthika* standpoint Brahman is non-dual. Brahman alone *is* and there is nothing beyond or besides it. It can never become an object as It is beyond the reach of human senses. Looking from the *vyāvahārika* level Brahman is seen with different attributes. As such it has a provisional reality and this provisional reality is at the same time necessary for empirical existence. In the empirical level man is badly in need of attributing forms and names to Brahman so that he may convey his idea of the supreme reality. Reflections on the absolute Brahman are possible only by means of empirical discourses.¹ When the acquisition of true knowledge takes place we will be able to see Brahman as *Nirguna* only.

CONCLUSION

In a world where we are living in multi-cultural and multi-religious context the philosophy of the Absolute proposed by Śankara is of special significance. The natural religions as well as revealed religions search the way to reach the Absolute. In their attempt to teach the way to reach the Absolute they call It by very many names. However, the Absolute is without any name and form. When we try to give names and attribute forms, it is only the human way of describing the Absolute. These descriptions need not be seen as having any eternal value. What remains and what *is*, is the Absolute.

1. MaKB 4.100.

ABBREVIATIONS

B	<i>Ātmabodha</i>
U	<i>Aitareya Upanishad</i>
UB	<i>Aitareya Upanishad Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
GB	<i>Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
SB	<i>Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
U	<i>Brhadāranyaka Upanishad</i>
UB	<i>Brhadāranyaka Upanishad Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
U	<i>Chandogya Upanishad</i>
UB	<i>Chāndogya Upanishad Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
aKB	<i>Māndukya Kārika Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
U	<i>Taittirīya Upanishad</i>
UB	<i>Taittirīya Upanishad Bhāṣya of Śankara</i>
C	<i>Vivekachudāmani</i>

LIST OF REFERENCES

WORKS OF SANKARACARYA

- *Works of Sankaracarya in original Sanskrit*, Vol I: Ten Principal Upanisads with Sankarabhasya, Delhi 1987
- *Works of Sankaracarya in original Sanskrit*, Vol II: Srimadbhagavadgita with Sankarabhasya, Delhi, 1988.
- *Works of Sankaracarya in original Sanskrit*, Vol III: Brahmasutra with Sankarabhasya, Delhi 1985
- *The Bhagavad Gita*, With Commentary of Sankaracarya tr. Sastry, A. M., Madras 1991
- *The Vedanda Sutras of Badarayana*, With the Commentary of Sankara, Part I & II, tr. Thibaut, G. New York, 1962
- *Eight Upanisads*, Vol I (Isa, Kena, Katha and Taittiriya) With the Commentary of Sankaracarya, tr. Gambhirananda, Swami, Calcutta 1989
- *Eight Upanisads*, Vol II (Aitareya, Mundaka, Mandukya & Karika and Prasna) With the Commentary of Sankaracarya, tr. Gambhirananda, Swami, Calcutta 1990
- *The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, with Sankara's Commentary, tr. Madavananda, Swami, Mayavati 1988.
- *The Chandogya Upanisad: Containing the Original Text with word-by-word meaning*, tr. Sri. Ramakrishna Math, Madras 1984.
- *Self-knowledge: An English translation of Sankaracaryas Atmabodha* tr. Nikhilananda, Swami Madras 1987.
- *Vivekacudamani of Shri Sankaracarya* : tr. Madavananda, Swami, Calcutta 1957

OTHER WORKS

- Bhattacharyya, A. *Studies in Post-Sankara Dialectics*, Delhi 1956.
- Britto, F. "Sankara and Creation", *Indian ecclesiastical studies*, Vol. 12, (1973), 138-145

- Cochran, L A “Maya: The Great Veil”, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly: Students’ Supplement*, Vol.15, 1988, 1-12.
- Deutsch, E., *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*, Honolulu 1971
- Gupta, B.K., “The Meaning of The Absolute in Sankara and Swedenborg”, *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 24 (1975), 9-31.
- Hacker, P. *Vivarta: Studien zur Geschichte der illussionistischen Kosmologie und Erkenntnistheorie der Inder*, Weisbaden, 1953.
- Mahadevan, T.M.P. “Sankara”, D.H. Bishop, ed. *Indian Thought: An Introduction*, New Delhi, 1975, 283-300.
- Rambachan, A., “The Value of the world as the Mystery of God in Advaita Vedanta”, *Journal of Dharma*, Vol.14, 1989, 287-29